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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions and challenges brought against organizational communication scholars who follow the critical tradition. Specifically addressed in the paper are the following issues: (1) the vocabulary of critical theory; (2) assumptions and goals of critical theory; (3) critical theory and the politics of academe; and (4) critical theory and application. The paper concludes by highlighting the potential of critical theory for exploring and bringing new understanding to the field of organizational communication. A table describing differences among basic, applied, and participative research is included. Contains 34 references. (Author/RS)

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WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY? AN ESSAY FOR THE UNINITIATED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SCHOLAR

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Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association of America Convention in Miami, FL

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Abstract

This essay explores and attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions and challenges brought against organizational communication scholars who follow the critical tradition. Specifically addressed are the following issues: (1) the vocabulary of critical theory, (2) assumptions and goals of critical theory, (3) critical theory and the politics of academe, and (4) critical theory and application. The author concludes by highlighting the potential of critical theory for exploring and bringing new understanding to the field of organizational communication.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY? AN ESSAY FOR THE UNINITIATED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SCHOLAR

INTRODUCTION

What is critical theory and what is its role in the field of organizational communication? To the uninitiated, the answers to these questions do not necessarily come easily because it requires that one be acquainted with both the rather complex vocabulary of terms and concepts unique to the tradition, as well as with critical theory's multifaceted historical emergence as a mode of inquiry.

To date most writings on critical theory in communication seem to have had as their audience those presumed to have an a priori interest in or acquaintance with the tradition. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide the uninitiated researcher with a layperson's translation of critical theory and its role within the field of organizational communication. Specifically, focus will be given to a review of relevant vocabulary unique to the tradition, to the assumptions and goals of the tradition, and to the role the critical researcher is seen to hold in the larger research context. Also reviewed will be some of the debate surrounding the politics of critical theory as a mode of organizational inquiry, followed by a discussion of two research methods whose objectives are application of critical thought.

VOCABULARY OF CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory has its own vocabulary for making sense of the world. When an individual first encounters the vocabulary, s/he can be intimidated. Following the introduction, s/he may then become confused due to the debates that continue over the interpretations and significance of the various terms. For instance, a critical researcher may state his/her research objective as follows: "It is important that we are alert to systematically distorted communication arrived at through ideological functions that foster hegemony and, therefore, foster inequitable systems of domination and power as well. By focusing on organizational discourses, we can isolate social

practices which have become reified and serve to limit social actors' ability to discursively penetrate. Enabling social actors to discursively penetrate is the first step toward their emancipation from inequitable systems of domination and power." The following is a brief extrapolation of the terms in the above stated research objective. It is important to note, however, that neither the definitions suggested here nor those offered by the broader academic community, are static and/or easily agreed upon conceptualizations.

Glossary of terms:

discourse: This is at the central focus of any critical analysis. Discourse is the embodiment of normalized discursive and non-discursive practices, which involves both the verbal and the textual. According to the critical tradition, discursive practices embody the forces which constrain and enable social actors within a social community. Analyses of a social community's discursive practices enables the discovery of power relationships, instances of domination, and ideology (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1977; Mumby, 1988).

power: This is a central concept of critical theory, and one that has long been debated. A simplified understanding of power is as a function of control over social and/or organizational resources (persons included). Those wielding power can control others in varying ways, getting them to engage in activities not in the powerless' best interests (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1977; Mumby, 1988).

ideology: Ideology is an historical phenomenon, and is embodied in discursive practices and social texts. It serves as the medium by which social actors make sense of the world and by which they come to construct their individual subjectivity. In critical theory, ideology is seen to function in a pejorative (negative) sense, hiding social contradictions and inequitable distributions of resources and power (Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Foucault, 1977; Geuss, 1981; Mumby,

1988; Therborn, 1980).

hegemony: This is often defined as the production of false consensus, false consensus referring to the state of agreement reached by social actors which is actually contradictory in nature (e.g. a sense of blind agreement), arrived at through dialectical tension. The agreement is contradictory in the sense that it often does not serve an actor's best interests. For instance, one could agree, as is the social norm, that at the age of 26 one is too young to be a corporative executive. However, the age 26 largely is an arbitrary restriction, any 26 year old may very well have the ability to be a successful executive if given the chance. The notion of hegemony was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci (1971), and defined as the organizing of spontaneous consent among subordinate groups, allowing one group to emerge as leader over others. In this sense hegemony is understood as a positive concept in terms of the production of intellectual and moral leadership.

domination: This is a social condition in which certain social interests of one group are favored in systems of representation to the detriment of the interests of other social groups. Domination is made possible through the functions of ideology and concomitant hegemony; it is the product of power inequities. Domination is present to the extent that one group's interests are privileged over others. Hegemony, as false consciousness, or false agreement, is the condition in which the social actors being dominated naively (or unquestioningly) agree to the power relationships, believing them as normal or the way things are (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1977; Mumby, 1988).

reification: This is the process through which socially constructed relations, rules, meanings,. etc., come to be percieved as natural, as unchangeable and as real. (Giddens, 1979; Lukacs, 1971; Mumby, 1988)

systematically distorted communication: Habermas understands this as ideology itself. Others understand systematically distorted communication as the result of ideological discursive practices producing false consensus. It occurs as an ideology functions to include and/or exclude certain political agendas in a systematic fashion. Systematically distorted communication is directly related to relationships of power and domination, and acts as an enabling agent in ensuring that the dominant group continues to dominate (Giddens, 1979; Habermas, 1970).

discursive penetration: The degree to which social actors are capable of reflecting (self-reflection) upon their social position and interest representation, and to articulate the two (Giddens, 1979; Mumby, 1988). For example, once one penetrates the discourse that suggests that the age of 26 is too young to allow one to be a corporate executive, and realizes that age does not necessarily determine ability, one engages in discursive penetration.

emancipation: As the goal of critical theory, emancipation is found in either radical societal change within a social community, or in relative degrees of reflection and enlightenment arrived at through the facilitation of discursive penetration among social actors. Emancipation largely is equated with the ability to reflect critically on social practices and to understand them for what they truly are apart from their ideological representation (Deetz, 1992; Deetz, 1982; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Geuss, 1981; Giddens, 1979; Mumby, 1988).

ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS OF CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory as research largely descended from the Frankfurt School (Geuss, 1981; Mumby, 1988). Habermas is credited with articulating the heart of critical influence as being "towards the development of a maximally enlightened self-awareness"

in society (Montefoire, et al., in Geuss (1981), p. viii). Accompanying this are many influences of Marxian ideas. Marxist thought compliments many of the goals of modernism. Marx was concerned with the potential for the alienation of man. In Marxist theory, society is regarded largely as a product of capitalism, imbued with inequitable relationships between capitalists and laborers. Locating and doing away with these inequitable relationships brings about the possibility for emancipation. In terms of modernist thought, emancipation is attained through the pursuit of logical reasoning and rational thought, the end product which is the enlightenment of individuals.

Critical theory posits that these social inequities are the result of power relationships. In general, the laborers within a capitalist system are potentially oppressed by those in control of capital. Those who control capital, synonymous with resources critical to the adequate functioning of a social system, are those capable of wielding power over other groups. In short, the capitalists control the needed resources and, therefore, their interests are represented to the detriment of the laborers'. The voices of the laborers essentially are marginalized, allowing the capitalists to exploit them.

Geuss (1981) provides an overarching definition of a critical theory as "a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation" (p. 2). He offers three essential distinguishing features of critical theories: (1) they serve as guides for human action, bringing about the potential for self-reflection and therefore emancipatory instances; (2) "they are forms of knowledge;" and (3) they are radically different from traditional social theories in that their goal is reflection on, not objectification of, social practices (p. 2). As summed up by Deetz and Kersten (1983), critical theorists reflect on the "why" of reality construction in attempts to bring about social change (p. 161).

Kersten (1985) provides a synthesis of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical theory. In the critical tradition the epistemological argument is that any "separation between subject and object is unacceptable." This notion is based on the ontological principles: (1) "reality as constituted in practice," (2) "reality as a multilevel structure," and (3) "reality as systematically distorted" (p. 764).

As a mode of inquiry in organizational communication, critical theory uniformly seeks to accomplish three tasks: understanding (insight), critique, and education (Deetz, 1992; Deetz, 1982; Deetz & Kersten, 1983, Mumby 1988).

> Understanding requires descriptions of the social reality in the organization and the forces that form, deform, sustain, and change that reality. Critique focuses on examining the legitimacy of consensus and reason-giving activities in an organization and the forces bearing upon them. Education develops the capacity of organizational members to engage in self-formation through participation in organizational practices and decision making that are free and unrestrained. (Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p. 148)

It is important to note that the critical research process is not complete until the three tasks described above have been accomplished and articulated in such a way as to provide a "reproblematization" of political relationships within a given social community. The ideal product of these three tasks is the facilitation of social change to bring about more equitable representation of all social actors and their interests.

DEFINITION AND ROLE OF THE CRITICAL RESEARCHER

Mumby (1988) notes that the role of the critical theorist cum researcher is definitely not one of neutral objectivity. This is an impossibility in light of the objectives of the critical tradition. The critical researcher operates under the a priori assumption of the need to facilitate social change aimed at bringing about favor

and representation of interests of the oppressed, as opposed to only the interests of those in domination. Furthermore, to bring about adequate understanding, critique, and education, Mumby (1988) refers to Thompson (1984), noting that the researcher is required "to produce an interpretation of an interpretation" (Mumby, 1988, p. 109). This process demands that the critical researcher attempt to see into the world of a given social community, and to re-present the social actors' ways of sense making so as to expose the operant ideology and concomitant instances of hegemony and contradictory relationships of domination.

Deetz's (1992) point is well taken as he discusses both the definition and role of the critical researcher. He underscores the importance of the individual researcher to the integrity of the critical tradition as "it is individuals alone and in concert who act and are responsible," not theory or research (p. 83). Deetz further articulates the definition of the critical researcher, arguing that the researcher is above all, an intellectual. According to him, an intellectual is anyone who engages in systematic reflection (discursive penetration) upon life's experiences. He notes that such terms as "researcher and scholar are too detached and implicitly privileged for their use to be anything other than a hidden power move" (p. 83).

The integrity of Deetz's definition of the critical researcher as an intellectual comes to fruition when understood in its historical relationship to the critical writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971). According to Gramsci, all individuals have the capacity to function as intellectuals, but not all do in a given social context (1971, p. 9). He delineates two important categories of intellectuals: traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are those whose position is part of an established historic continuity. Individuals falling within this category are those in ecclesiastes positions, judiciary positions, etc. The organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are, in a sense, emergent from and created by social class. According to

Gramsci, these individuals are the ones capable of reflecting upon their origin and that of social actors of similar experiences. The organic intellectual is also distinguished for an ability to organize "masses of men" and as "an organizer of confidence..." (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5).

At base, Gramsci underscores the importance of the continual production of organic intellectuals as they are the ones capable of organizing the masses in such a way as to overcome traditionally institutionalized forms of dominance. This function of the intellectual is built on the premise that there exists a "need to create the conditions most favorable to the expansion of their own class" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 6).

I believe there is value in arguing that many (not all) intellectuals tend to be scholars and, as such, classify as "organic," because scholars cum intellectuals tend to emerge from all levels of the social classes. They "are distinguished less by their profession...than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 87). The notion of the intellectual directing the ideas and aspirations of the social classes lends itself well to the role of the modern critical theorist.

Intellectuals in concert sustain the progress of the critical tradition in organizational study. They seek to represent individuals under oppression, and serve as strategists in "recovering alternative practices and marginalized alternative messages" (Deetz, 1992, p. 87). As a product of social class, the critical intellectual is seen positioned so as to relate well to class struggles while yet having the inherent or trained ability to engage in critical reflection upon social practices.

Mumby (1988) draws from the writings of Gadamer in further outlining the role of a critical intellectual. In large part, the intellectual is to engage with individuals and their social world "in such a way as to articulate a fresh way of looking at their

world" (p. 147), "to make the familiar become strange" (Mumby, 1988, p. 163), "to analyze what is presumed as real" (Deetz, 1982, p. 134), and "to use this strangeness as an incentive for critique and change" (Mumby, 1988, p. 163). The ability of the critical intellectual to articulate this new view, its value based on its potential to produce emancipation, stems from the intellectual's freedom from many of the constraints of social discursive practices and institutional representations which typically encapsulate the masses. While the critical intellectual is "not privileged, [he/she] is capable of the distantiation necessary for claiming counterdiscourses within particular sites of production" (Deetz, 1992, p. 86). New discourses produce new insights. New insights produce the potential for and reality of social change. Mumby (1988) provides a comprehensive description of the role of the organizational researcher/intellectual:

> "...to expose and critique the process by which a particular organizational ideology produces and reproduces the corresponding structure of power within the organization. Ideally speaking, one of the products of such research would be the articulation of an alternative organizational reality that opposes or reconstructs the dominant ideology. This alternative reality would not be reproduced and imposed on organization members by the researcher, but would rather be generated via the dialectic between researcher and organization members. (p. 146)

At the same time, however, the limits of the intellectual are not to be dismissed. We can also make the argument that intellectuals are constrained by their own participation/membership in the "masses," and by their ability/inability to engage in critical reflexive thought about their own critical thought. This latter argument remains to be explored further.

CRITICAL THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF ACADEME

It was suggested earlier in this paper that there continues an ongoing debate about the politics of critical theory. The uninitiated researcher should be acquainted with the various questions being raised.

Haslett (1990) articulates one question within this debate, which alludes to the political implications of a critical theory of organizational communication's ideology of "the domination of organizations by managerial capitalism" (p. 48). While the notion of domination by managment is relevant, Haslett argues that as a focus it is too narrow, and therefore limiting as an appropriate perspective from which to understand organizations. She argues that "today's organizations are too complex and diverse to be subsumed under one political ideology" (1990, p. 49). Haslett goes on to list things such as complexities of access to power, cross-cultural differences, diversity among managers, and complex organizational structure as defying the appropriateness of the managerial domination metaphor. What I would add to Haslett's argument is that the critical tradition seems to treat the dominant or ruling classes in a manner which does not strongly underscore the notion that these classes are as much a victim of practices of power and domination as are laborers. This may be seen as a highly problematic assumption because it reifies the notion that the intellectual is capable of discerning the good from the bad, and, in essence, it seems to objectify the dominant/ruling class as non-people. Deetz (1992) does suggest in passing that domination of interests may "restrict everyone to no one's benefit" (p. 207), and in his discussion of "managerialism," a form of capitalist ideology, he does argue that <u>all</u> social actors are subject to ideology, hegemonic practices of power and domination, and false consensus (Deetz, 1992).

Perhaps the debate goes beyond charges such as Haslett's and originates with the term itself. Grossberg (1987) suggests that:

The term <u>critical</u> is itself problematic. First, it is ambiguous, oscillating

between a political and a methodological (interpretive, textual) register. Second, it resonates with a kind of arrogance that assumes that the speaker has a privileged handle, not only on self-reflection, but also on political values. Thus an account of critical research can deteriorate into the claim that no one else's efforts are really critical; definitions then become manifestoes, full of normative statements disguised as descriptive interpretations. (p. 103)

Critical theory as ambiguous

Grossberg (1987) suggests that as a discipline, critical theory "is ambiguous, oscillating between a political and a methodological register" (p. 103). The ambiguity Grossberg refers to could easily begin with the confusion over the methodological tradition within the critical paradigm. Agreement seems to be hard to come by. Deetz (1982) and Kersten (1985) both provide methodological guidelines for critical theory, but they are both careful to qualify the provided guidelines as done only on a very general basis. Deetz (1982) argues that critical methods need to be changed "in regard to the situated phenomena" instead of being viewed as universally prescriptive (p. 143).

Grossberg articulates the notion that "critical researchers often act as if numbers...necessarily misrepresent the world" (p. 97). Tendencies such as these call for more confusion in understanding the critical paradigm and its methodological claims. This is especially so as frequently, the methodology of critical research is posited as:

> neither exclusively quantitative, nor exclusively qualitative...[It] does not prescribe the use of specific quantitative or qualitative methods, nor does it present a determinate relationship between theory and data (Kersten, 1985, p. 768).

Deetz (1980) argues that critical theory is a "rigorous approach" to the

acquisition of knowledge (p. 132; Deetz,. 1982, p. 145). He, though, equates the tradition as interpretive and therefore largely qualitative. The question of the integrity of quantitative v. qualitative method within critical research remains open to debate.

Critical theory's allegiance to the critique of organizational discourse/texts is also potentially problematic as one seeks to understand the definition of discourse/texts and their constitution/s. Definitions range from verbalizations, to written documents, to material representations, and so on.

In sum, the biggest proponent of the notion of ambiguity as it relates to the critical tradition is probably to be found in the rather intangible, yet central, process of providing "appropriate action" for overcoming "blockages and repressions and the forces which sustain them" (Deetz, 1982, p. 140). This is done through the interpretation of interpretations and the facilitation of self-reflection. The goal may be well articulated, but the way to actually attain it is not so well articulated. In relation to the traditional notions of validity, reliability, etc., the critical tradition is valued as it can claim "objectivity, coherence, and rhetorical force" within reported findings (Deetz, 1982, p. 147). These notions depart from traditional claims of validity and reliabiltiy, and so too have been perceived as confusing.

Critical theory and political implications

Facilitating appropriate action, discovering blockages and repressions, and favoring the emancipation of the oppressed is inherently political. Mumby (1988) refers to Jameson (1981), discussing "the process of interpretation [as] first and foremost a political process" (p. 160). Presupposing systematic distortion and an "oppressed" is itself political. Even more controversial is the critical tradition's well articulated allegiance to the oppressed and to their emancipation (Grossberg, 1987), or to the discovery of false consensus "and the means by which it is

constructed" (Deetz, 1982, p. 133). Assuming the existence of an "oppressed" as well as false consensus as negative discursive practice, is viewed by some as highly political. Furthermore, in the area of organizational communication, the oppressed are defined as the labor force and the primary aim of the critical intellectual is "to challenge managerial bias inherent in traditional research by showing how organizations function as sites of political domination and exploitation" (Mumby & Putnam, 1992, p. 3; also Deetz, 1985; Deetz & Mumby, 1990).

Critical theory is political also in that it takes a radical departure from the traditional functionalism which is so well established in most sciences. The methodological perspective engaged in by critical theory is that based largely on interpretive modes of inquiry, by which a hermeneutic understanding of the world of social actors is sought. This perspective tends to have as a focus of study either social texts as historically recorded, or the discursive practices of social actors as observed by or participated in by the intellectual. Anyone familiar with the interpretive approach is well acquainted with the controversy surrounding it as a valid method of research.

Critical theory moves a step beyond interpretive inquiry though. The interpretive paradigm allows one to provide descriptions aimed at making sense of "practice." The critical paradigm allows one to provide this description of how social actors make "sense," yet demands a concern with "praxis." Praxis consists of the incorporation of emancipatory theory with social practice in a transformative capacity (Mumby, 1988, p. 147). In this sense a transformative capacity refers to the condition in which social actors are able to conceive of alternative ways of making sense, as well as being able to participate in changing the ways they currently make sense.

As noted in the various definitions and descriptions of the roles of the critical researcher (intellectual) given above, the critical claims it is neither essentialist

nor elitist (Deetz, 1982), yet such charges have been made against it (Grossberg, 1987, p. 88). Deetz and Mumby (1990) acknowledge the potential for the critical tradition to run "the risk of replacing one form of discourse with another" in the interests of emancipation, but they argue that adoption of "a position of perpetual critique" will avoid such a pitfall (p. 44). In this, perpetual critique is offered as that which does not privilege any one discourse but does, instead, "indicate how any one discourse is necessarily the product of an arbitrary structure of interests" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 44). Grossberg (1987), however, cautions the critical researcher of the political ramifications of taking the side of the oppressed, and to be careful to not allow his/her research to be "full of normative statements disguised as descriptive interpretations" (p. 103).

From within the critical tradition as it is utilized in the field of organizational communication, the critical researcher does have to deal with an ambiguity of method, but that seems hardly an unique challenge. In any type of research, qualitative or quantitative, critical or non-critical, degrees of ambiguity are inherent as the researcher has to choose among competing paradigms by which to frame the research, among units of analysis, and among alternative forms of research protocol to follow. No research design is without relative degrees of ambiguity.

The same argument can be made against the charge that critical research, and the researcher's role therein, is highly political. In any research endeavor the researcher necessarily enters the project with some kind of a priori assumptions. Again in any research program, the researcher makes choices, conscious or unconscious, about the ontological and epistemological status of the phenomenon of investigation; about ways to proceed methodologically; about what to focus on and not to focus on; about what to write about, describe and explain. All these choices are by definition valuative, and therefore, political.

As to the elitist charge, we can easily argue that much of the integrity of a critical theory of organizational communication lies in the researchers' willingness to take up the cause of those whose voices have been marginalized. Departing from tradition which has become institutionalized as normal, is almost always anticipated as political by the larger research community. In the case of explicitly seeking to undermine managerial domination so as to "emancipate" the workers, the critical tradition does depart from traditional organizational communication theory, and therefore invites criticism. But, upon "reflection," the effort should well be applauded for the willingness to seek social change in the face of resistance.

In seeking social change, the critical researcher does, of course, have to have some idea of what constitutes equitable and healthy social practices and representation. Making judgments such as these is highly controversial. If the critical researcher provides interpretations of interpretations, and indeed it is impossible to do otherwise given any type of research, how can he/she know what is right or what is wrong? Or, how can he/she know that the representation given the social community of interest, is correct? How can the critical researcher avoid imposing his/her values, interests, biases, and assumptions on the very group he/she seeks to explain and emancipate? Haslett (1990) underscores the problematic in assuming "that one's interests are sufficiently knowable" (p. 54). Grossberg (1987) suggests that:

> ...a critical theory of communication faces a rather unique dilemma, since its very discourses reproduce some of the very relations of power that it seeks to identify and oppose. In part, three strategies commonly articulate the political implications of communication theory: Communication is given a transcendental status as the fundamental process of human existence; a widely diverse set of practices is subordinated to an imposed identity; and a particular reduction of

> the multiple and contradictory subject positionings of cultural practices is accomplished--the communicative subject is located as the source of our freedom of participation and agency. Questions of power are reduced to those of communicative equality, freedom of participation, the distribution of competencies, and the free flow of information (as if these were either real historical events or guaranteed utopian relationships). Thus, within the contemporary historical and intellectual context, we cannot ignore the political effects of our own discourses that purport to explain and describe a finite set of human practices. (p. 104)

Ideally, we may take solace in the notion that many critical researchers have, in Gramscian terms, organic origins. Having emerged from among the social masses, the organic intellectual is, by definition, capable of drawing on that origin and is therefore able to understand and represent adequately those they seek to emancipate. The ideal of course, for Gramsci (1971), is that each intellectual represent his of her own class. In this sense, the critical researcher has a radical role in that he/she should not seek to prescribe, but involve (Mumby, 1988, p. 148). On the other hand, as noted earlier in this paper, we can argue that the intellectual is not free from ideological constraints, and therefore, may represent his/her "others" inappropriately.

CRITICAL THEORY AND APPLICATION

Departing from such an idealist argument though, we may turn to what critical researchers of organizational communication have responded with. Their response, in large part and beyond the argument favoring the integrity of emancipation for whatever degrees it may come about, can be found in the practices of action research and participatory research. Both "explicitly cite social change as their primary goal" and "incorporate the social actor as an active participant in the planning and implementation of change" (Mumby, 1988, p. 148). Mumby (1988) notes this similarity

between action and participatory research, while at the same time noting that "each has a different conception of the relationship between the individual and his or her social context" (p. 148).

Rapoport's (1970) definition of action research is credited as the one most often quoted (Mumby, 1988, p. 143). He provides the following definition: "Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in a social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499). Within organizations, action research is generally undertaken when a problem has already been noted within that specific organization and judged (usually by the parties corresponding to the notion of management) as worthy of investigation and possible change. In this sense, researchers have clients, the above definition of action research emphasizing "the importance of both scientific contributions and problem solutions and stresses the common values and standards that link researchers and clients" (Brown & Tandon, 1983, p. 278). The clients are the organizations, generally consisting of those holding organizational power. Action research aims "to provide the necessary competencies to engage in problem-solving research" (Mumby, 1988, p. 148), the provision of these competencies developed for assimilation and use by laborers/subordinates.

While action research departs from traditional prescriptive research, seeking knowledge appropriate for application to the context under study instead of focusing on making larger generalizations (Mumby, 1988), it is still regarded by critical researchers within the field of organizational communication as problematic. First, it "assumes that problem solutions aceptable [sic] to many parties are possible," but this assumption privileges the parties in power because the possibility only works and is seen as "reasonable when the distribution of resources and authority is generally seen as legitimate" by all parties involved (Brown & Tandon, 1983, p. 289). As Mumby (1988)

notes, action research, generally, tends "to support the structure of the status quo" (p. 150). At a glance, supporting the status quo is in direct contradiction to the goal of the critical tradition of articulating a fresh way for social actors "to look at their world" (Mumby, 1988, p. 147), "to make the familiar become strange" (Mumby, 1988, p. 163), "to analyze what is presumed as real" (Deetz, 1982, p. 134), and "to use this strangeness as an incentive for critique and change" (Mumby, 1988, p. 163). In essence, critical researchers seek to uncover, critique and undermine the status quo and the limitations it imposes on social action, not to add to the reification of the status quo as both as real and as normative.

Participatory research, on the other hand, is an alternative to action research (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Mumby, 1988), and is capable of more fully incorporating the objectives of critical theory. Participatory research is more amenable to the critical tradition as it "rejects the status quo and seeks to transform the existing power relations. In this sense, participatory research is emancipatory" (Mumby, 1988, p. 150).

Brown and Tandon (1983) describe participatory researchers as motivated by "commitment to social change and social justice" and their work is appropriate "when the legitimacy of power and resource distribution is questioned, [and] when client groups are aware of and mobilized to influence their situation...(p. 290). It's important to note the value of the client groups, here denoting the commitment and willingness of oppressed people to seek social change. As Brown and Tandon (1983) state, oppressed groups are not always ready for this type of commitment because often, they stand to lose much if the project fails. Even the participatory researcher can lose much because siding with the oppressed is often not welcomed by those in power. Here the critical researcher must act carefully in pursuing research goals.

Participatory research depends on social actors themselves to carry out the bulk

of the research project proposed. Through this, they themselves become aware of the discursive and potentially dominant practices within their own community. Once aware of their positions, theoretically they have taken the first step toward securing their own emancipation from discursive and non-discursive practices of power and domination; they are increasingly capable of discursive penetration. The participatory researcher acts as trainer and guide and has as his/her primary goal the introduction of "fundamental structural change through exposing the myths that a dominant power structure imposes on people" (Mumby, 1988, p. 7).

The integrity of participatory research and the way it is to be judged, "in the long run by whether or not it has the ability to serve the specific and real interests of the working class and other oppressed people" (Hall, 1981, p. 13), parallels well the values and beliefs held by the critical tradition. Gaventa (1988) further underscores the integrity of participatory research, because it endorses the value of "workers' own knowledge" which often is "diminished by the hegemony of the ruling class" (p. 24). Gramsci (1971) would embrace this notion as he saw in every individual the potential for being an intellectual of sorts, and thereby as having the potential to contribute emancipatory knowledge.

Elden (1981) too, applauds the role of the participatory researcher, defining it as that of a "co-producer of learning" (p. 262). This definition departs from researcher as teacher or producer of learning as is found in action research, and from researcher as privileged commentator as is found within more traditional functional perspectives. Researcher as co-producer of learning has both intuitive and ethical appeal.

Mumby (1988) notes, however, that a number of charges have been made against the participatory research agenda. First, many scholars argue that "it is unscientific" (p. 152). This argument is highly controversial because it is based on the knowledge

that the participatory researcher "deliberately supports the values of a particular group in society," instead of maintaining value-free objectivity (Mumby, 1988, p. 152). But, as discussed before, no research is completely value-free, and indeed, it is the participatory researcher's goal (as well as the critical researcher's goal) to depart from the tradition of the natural sciences and focus on the politically laden structures of power and domination which methods adapted from the natural sciences tend to miss.

Participatory research has also been charged as inappropriate for American studies as it largely has been conducted in third world countries (Mumby, 1988, p. 153; also Hall, 1981, p. 7). Gaventa (1988) responds to this charge, arguing that, "The participatory research method and idea are, however, by no means limited to developing countries" (p. 20). He lists three instances in which participatory research may be seen as appropriate within the American context: (1) "In areas, or groups where dominant knowledge has been a force for control but in which there is little access to sympathetic expertise;" (2) when "Conducted by groups concerned with education of people;" and (3) when "Growing out of a concern with participation by the people in decisions that affect their lives..." (p. 20).

Gaventa then highlights three strategies of participatory research which have been found valuable in North America. The first is research aiming at a reappropriation of knowledge. Examples of this research are community power structure research, corporate research, and "right-to-know" movements. The second strategy aims at developing the people's knowledge and awareness. And, the third strategy aims at popular participation in the social production of knowledge (Gaventa, 1988). Gaventa does note, however, that participatory research is not without its implications: "By altering who controls knowledge, what knowledge is produced, and indeed, the very definition of what constitutes knowledge may also change" (p. 26). For some, this

implication is highly problematic.

Gaventa and Horton (1981) facilitated an actual application of a participatory research project within the Appalachian Mountain region, hoping to give the oppressed mountain folk a voice within the larger political context. More specific to the North American organizational context though, was the participatory research effort undertaken by Brown and Kaplan (1981). These researchers were involved in a five year organizational and development project at the Northern Chemical Works which had as its central focus "the processes of joint inquiry by which external researchers and organization members examined organizational 'realities' and encouraged constructive change" (Brown & Kaplan, 1981, p. 303).

Participatory research methods seem to have potential for successful application within North American organizational contexts. Problems arise, however, when one reflects on how to go about facilitating participatory research. Access to most organizations is controlled by those in power, the very group whose interests are privileged at the expense of the other organizational members. Even Brown and Kaplan's (1981) factory project began only after they had been approached by a factory manager who had "been appointed to 'turn the works around,' particularly in the sense of improving employee relations. He approached the authors for aid in diagnosing and solving employee relations problems" (Brown & Kaplan, 1981, p. 304).

Elden (1981) too underscores the problem such as that found in Brown and Kaplan's study, noting "that participatory research in the workplace at least initially depends on the goodwill of those in power," and even if the project is begun, "One could question how realistic it is to expect an existing power structure to allow itself to be fundamentally transformed" (p. 266). In light of this, Mumby (1988) notes that in their factory research, Brown and Kaplan found it best to compromise, siding with both management and laborers, working with those in power rather than against, in hopes of

facilitating some sort of changes to the power structure already in place (p. 155; also Brown & Kaplan, 1981, p. 304). While intuitively appealing, participatory research is not without practical and political limitations.

DISCUSSION

Coming back to an attempt to answer the question about what critical theory is, we can see that no response is free of political and/or problematic implications, specifically as assuming the existence of an oppressed is undeniably political. Ultimately, the critical tradition urges organizational communication scholars to not treat social actions as if they occur in a political vacuum. This is an undeniably important contribution to organizational communication research. Furthermore, it seems that the integrity of critical theory may very well lie in the individual commitments and intentions of the critical researcher. If he/she is "more motivated by commitments to social change and social justice than by the hope of professional and institutional recourse" (Brown & Kaplan, 1981, p. 291), then his/her research efforts, ideally, should be embraced.

Acknowledging that "oppressed groups often recognize problems, even when system authorities do not see any difficulties," (although most critical researchers would more than likely replace "often" with "occasionally") Brown and Kaplan (1981) give voice to the need for someone to take up the cause of the oppressed. And, where a critical researcher is capable of discovering instances of social oppression, even (and especially) if the oppressed group is not capable of articulating, or willing to articulate, their positions of oppression, the researcher's efforts to begin the process should be applauded. Most individuals would like to claim personal commitment to social justice, so why not encourage those who desire to actively engage in facilitating it?

Some may be disturbed by the implication of a universal moral good; the critical

researcher's response is, "then so be it." "Social good" in North America is defined by the critical tradition in relation to "true democracy." Most Americans can fully appreciate the implications of democracy and, in fact, tend to embrace them as good and emancipatory.

The problems come if the critical researcher forgets that critical inquiry and practice, especially action and participatory endeavors, are situational and contingent upon political demands, and need to be treated as such. The political ramifications of the inquiry project need to be weighed carefully and used as a guide for the implementation of any self-reflective discourse or activity. It behooves the critical researcher to be open to compromise such as that reached by Brown and Kaplan (1981). To help the oppressed Brown and Kaplan had to help those who were already in power as well as those who were in positions of oppression.

In any capitalist system this type of compromise is only practical, unless one's goals transcend the immediate situation of inquiry in favor of some future radical change. If this type of long-term focus is the case, then it seems it would be prudent for the critical researcher to remain apart from both action and participatory research endeavors, contenting him/herself instead with "metacommentaries" aimed at other intellectuals who, in turn, are capable of incorporating the awareness bred by the proposed critical discourse into their own research efforts. Grossberg (1987) notes:

> ...the critical researcher must always be a bit humble: on the one hand, content to provide a piece of the larger puzzle, a limited (and always determined) perspective on contemporary historical relations and, on the other hand, always reluctant to privilege their own position too much (that is always fighting against the elitism that seems at times an almost irresistible product of social position of the intellectual in capitalism). (pp. 102-103)

Deetz (1992) suggests that the most productive position for the critical

researcher/intellectual is within the American university systems. Academe has the potential to make a solid impact as "The university experience is still a powerful one for students" (Deetz, 1992, p. 346). Through the educational system, Deetz sees the opportunity to create as new discourse which makes clear "the oppressive character" (p. 347) of much of what we generally and without question accept as normal. In essence, the critical researcher/intellectual may acquaint university students with "true democracy" and equip them with the voice of participation and emancipation. Research efforts would culminate in those such as done by Mumby (1987), in which he uses the principles of critical theory to bring to light the political functions of storytelling and/or narrative in organizational life.

Regardless of the position occupied and the role taken on, the critical researcher, as any other researcher, does well to adhere to ethical principles such as those endorsed by the American Anthropological Association, and as outlined by J. P. Spradley (1979), which endorse the need for the researcher to protect those he/she is working with or representing in issues of interest; to honor their dignity and welfare; to avoid exploitation of any individual; and, above all, to remember that any descriptions provided "can be used to oppress people or to set them free" (Spradley, 1979, p. 17). Just as anthropology and ethnography are to be done in "the service of humankind" so too is critical research ideally to be conducted in "the service of humankind."

It seems useful here to provide a re-presentation of Elden's (1981) framework of "Some Correlates of Different Types of Workplace Research" (See Table 1).

Insert table 1 about here

Developing the purpose of any instance of critical inquiry from answers to the types of questions and implications posed by Elden will help frame the role of the critical researcher, as well as helping avoid any elitist connotations being attached to the inquiry.

At the outset, the critical researcher needs to determine the research goal, in this discipline always framed from within a perspective calling for social change and emancipation. An important priority to be determined is the immediacy of the social change desired, as well as the magnitude of the social change desired. Also to be incorporated in the research purpose are the questions concerning who is to learn from the research in "the first instance" (Elden, 1981, p. 263). The critical researcher's audience in large part (students or colleagues, corporate managers or laborers, etc.), will determine the possibility of questions to be asked, as well as demand differing ethical orientations. Two further implications for consideration relate to who will put the data to use, and how will and can the data be put to use. And, a final consideration relates to the relationship the critical researcher desires with research participants and benefactors, and well as with those who will not necessarily benefit, but perhaps will lose power.

Another way to cast these research concerns is: What is the research purpose? Who should or who will benefit from the research? How will or how could the research data be used? Can the research data potentially hurt or harm? What risks are the participants and/or the critical researcher willing to take? should take? How should

the participants be treated? What level of intelligence and ability is to be assumed? How are participants to be valued?

The desirability and practicality of critical projects can be determined by carefully asking questions such as those suggested above. Even though imbued with political implications, as well as having had political charges levelled against it, the critical tradition and its researchers are to be complimented for breaking ground where many "fear to tread."

Politicism and elitism aside, Grossberg (1987) argues for the value of critical theory:

> I want to start then by suggesting that the cornerstone of critical work is its committed opposition to any reductionism, its recognition that concrete reality is always more complex and contradictory than our intellectual schemes can represent. The task is more than learning to acknowledge this as a footnote to our analyses, and even more than learning to live with this complexity. The unfulfilled promise of critical work is to find ways of incorporating this fundamental insight into its most basic theoretical and analytic tools, to recognize that the truth is not always concrete. As Hall (1985a) puts it, we must "bend against the wind" and actively seek out that which, for whatever reasons, is being kept off the agenda (including our own), whatever is being silenced in the production, not only of social reality, but of social knowledge as well. (p. 89)

Table 1

Research Types: Differences Among Basic, Applied and Participative

	Type of Research		
	Basic research	Applied research	Participati research
Research goal.	Abstract general knowledge (context -free knowledge).	Solutions to work-place problems (context-bound knowledge).	Local theor actionable generalizab (context-bo knowledge).
Who learns from the research in the first instance?	The social science community (usually but not exclusively other researchers).	The client (usually but not exclusively management).	Participants (usually but r exclusively workers & re-searchers).
Liklihood that those who supply the data will use the results.	VERY LOW	LOW	HIGH
Relation between researcher and researchee(s).	Theoretician ↓ Object	Expert ↓ ↑ Client	Colleague ↕ Colleague
Researcher role .	Producer of distant learning.	Producer of organizational change.	Co-producer of learning and therefore of organizational change.

Note. From Human Inquiry (p. 263) by M. Elden, 1981, NY: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

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